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Editorial

THE MORAL EFFECT OF HISTORICAL STUDY

That the adoption of the historical point of view in studying and teaching the Bible raises many perplexing questions no intelligent advocate of historical study will deny. Of these none is more serious than the problem whether such teaching can be made morally and religiously effective. For they are right who demand that any method of teaching the Bible shall vindicate its right to be by showing that it can, not only impart correct historical conceptions, but also generate and develop a high type of character. Can the historical method do this?

Let it then be frankly affirmed at the outset that the historical method of study involves the modification of that idea of authority which was commonly held a generation ago and is by many still held. The historical method in itself indeed involves no presuppositions for or against the authority of the individual teachings of the Bible. But the prosecution of it soon leads to the discovery that the various portions of the Bible do not all present the same conception of God, the same ideals of religion, the same standards of moral conduct. And from this it obviously follows that the teacher of the Bible cannot say to his pupils or imply in his teaching: "Whatever teaching or command you find between the covers of the Book comes to you today with divine authority, and demands of you acceptance and obedience." The teacher of the Bible must find a more tenable basis for the authority of that which he presents to his pupils.

But the untenableness of the conception of the Bible as authoritative in every part for men of today is not an original discovery



"HE IS RISEN"

—Alex. Ender

of modern historical study. Jesus and Paul perceived and taught it long ago. All that historical study can claim is to have removed the scales that hindered our eyes from seeing what was taught us in the Bible itself. Jesus, to mention but a single example, declared that the Old Testament law of food was without valid basis. Paul made freedom from circumcision a vital element of his gospel. Both clearly rejected the authority of statutes, whose divine origin they did not dispute, for men of their day and by implication for men of subsequent times. Not less certainly did Jesus at least condemn the vindictive spirit expressed in some of the psalms. But even more significant than the rejection of individual statutes or the disapproval of single utterances of psalmist or prophet is the repudiation, which is in these things involved, of the whole principle of legalism and the method of developing character which is based upon legalism. The Christianity of Jesus and his great apostle is fundamentally a religion, not of an authoritative book, but of a God revealing himself through the experience of the individual and the race. He who would re-establish the legalistic idea of the Bible as in every part authoritative for men of today must build up what Jesus and Paul destroyed, and destroy what they built up.

But the New Testament not only protests against the teaching of religion on a basis of the authority of all the teachings of the book, it also points out what is to take its place. For, availing itself of all the light furnished by that transcendently valuable record of past experience contained in the Old Testament, it makes its appeal to the moral judgments of living men, enlightened by this ancient record and by contemporary experience, their own and that of their fellow-men. This was the method of Jesus. Subjecting the religion of his own day to a searching and discriminating criticism, which approved some elements and condemned others, he appealed to men to live as he lived and taught, on the ground that such living was harmonious with reality as known through experience past and present. This was the method of Paul. Speaking of the utterances of the prophets of his day, who spoke, as he confessed, by the Spirit, he bade his disciples: "Prove all things, hold fast the good." Rejecting the statutes of the Old Testament as clearly as he retained and reaffirmed certain of its fundamental religious and

ethical ideas, he defended this position by appeal to experience—his own, that of his nation, that of his gentile converts.

Can we devise a more effective way today? The historical method of study leads the pupil through the biblical record of the experience of centuries, including that of Old Testament patriarch, prophet, and psalmist, and New Testament Christ, and apostle, and common Christian. It does not say to him: "Each experience of all these is worthy of your imitation; each utterance of theirs comes to you with authority." It cannot do this if it would, for to do so would issue in the paradox of rejecting the teaching of the supreme teacher of all, Jesus himself. It would not if it could; for it has learned from him a better way. Jesus has taught us that this record of experience and teaching makes its appeal to every soul of man. To each one differently indeed, according to his age, maturity, personal experience, and attitude toward the good; but to each, if only it is rightly presented, in such way as to waken the divine imperative of his own soul, bidding him choose the good and flee the evil. If noble character and high ideals enforced by the teachings of history make no appeal; if the hideousness of evil and its outcome in life and character convey no effective warning, will the authority of the book or of statutes be more effective? Perhaps so, in some instances, and for a time. But the history of the church shows that there is no permanent development of character without the soul's consent to that which is good and response of will to its appeal. If the life of Abraham, of David, of Jesus himself with its unwavering faith and its self-sacrificing love, leave the heart unmoved; if the teachings of prophet, psalmist, sage, messiah, and apostle find no responsive chord, they are not likely to be persuaded by an assertion of authority exceeding that which the Bible itself warrants.

Doubtless to many there seems to be in all this great loss. So long has the idea of authority of church or book ruled the minds of men, so much easier is it indeed to make swift appeal to such authority than to find one's way to the citadel of the heart of man-soul, that any modification of this authority idea seems to be surrender of what is vital. But the loss is apparent, not real.

In the first place, the historical method of study makes for sin-

cerity, and conserves that honesty with one's self and supreme loyalty to truth which is essential to the development of high character. Many young men and women are facing today or will soon face the necessity of choosing between truth and the authority, in matters of belief of the church or the book. Even though they may have found no particular in which the book or the church is on the one side and truth on the other, the possibility of such a conflict hovers on the horizon, agitating the soul, and compelling it to decide whether it will give its allegiance to truth or, remanding this to a second place, make something else supreme. Nor can the crisis be evaded; for no man can serve two masters. In such tragic hour—for such it often is—every system that sets up church or book, not simply as a guide and help to truth, but as an authority that cannot be appealed from, necessarily gives its voice against the supremacy of truth as such. The historical method, on the other hand, speaks for truth, and bids the soul following this supremely, use all else, even church and book, as means to its discovery. It is an epoch in the history of any man when he ventures forth upon the truth alone, not even knowing yet what that truth is, but determined resolutely to follow it wherever it leads. He alone is God's free man; for the truth alone can make us free. Happy the man who comes to such decision through storm and stress, burning his bridges behind him and parting company with friends and thoughts that have been as dear as life to him. But happier still he who reaches it as the flower blossoms, as the natural outcome of healthful influences which have from earliest youth surrounded him.

But again, the adoption of the historical method is a gain, because history, if only the term be taken in its large and true sense, is the one great teacher of mankind. Or, better stated, it is God's one method of teaching men. Mere knowledge of historical facts is not wisdom. But he who will not learn from history debars himself from learning at all. For it is through history—i. e., through the knowledge of human experience—that men know all that they now know and must learn all that they are ever to learn. He who would order his life aright must do so in the light of experience; and the sphere of religion and morals is no exception to this broad principle. The pre-eminence of the Bible as a basis of religious instruction,

as an agent for the development of character, results not from its being outside the realm of history, but from the fact that it is a history of experience in the distinctly moral and religious sphere, and from the exceptionally significant character, and consequent pre-eminent value, of that experience. To study this record historically is but to seek to see and know God by retracing and living again those experiences of the race in which God has most fully revealed himself, which by common confession have most to teach us concerning the true way of life for man.

Finally we may trust historical study to be effective for the development of character, because the human soul brought face to face with experience has a capacity for responding to the truth which such experience suggests, and a tendency to be molded by it which can be evaded only by wilful perversity. The soul of man is made for truth; the will of man, for response to it—the two are suited the one to the other—as the soil to the seed. The teacher who can successfully bring his pupils face to face with the great characters of which the Bible contains a record, and the great truths which are disclosed in its history and set forth by its teachers, need never fear that such presentation will be ineffective.